

## Message Text

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ACTION EA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1345

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

CINCPAC

AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L VIENTIANE 8153

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PGOV, LA

SUBJ: SPECULATIONS ON SUCCESSOR TO PRIME MINISTER

1. AT SMALL LUNCHEON WITH AMBASSADOR AND DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY MILLER NOVEMBER 1, MINISTER OF DEFENSE SISOUK AND MINISTER OF FINANCE NGON SANANIKONE DISCUSSED THEIR VIEWS ON THE SUCCESSION TO SOUVANNA. THEY WERE BOTH OF ONE MIND ON THE SUBJECT. THEY HAD NOTED THAT TWO NORTH VIETNAMESE DOCTORS HAD GONE TO GRASSE TO VISIT SOUVANNA AND HANOI HAD THEN DRAWN CONCLUSION, THEY ASSERTED, THAT SOUVANNA MIGHT HAVE ONLY UP TO EIGHT MONTHS TO LIVE. (BASIS OF CONCLUSION NOT CLEAR, BUT BOTH MINISTERS SEEMED CONVINCED THAT SOUVANNA WAS INDEED SICK MAN WHO WOULD BE OPERATING AT ONLY PART OF HIS FULL EFFICIENCY.) THE TWO MINISTERS THEREFORE BELIEVED THAT THE DRV MUST HAVE BEEN DEVELOPING A PLAN OF ACTION AIMED AT SOUVANNA'S SUCCESSION. SOUPHANOUVONG WAS THEIR NATURAL CANDIDATE. THIS EXPLAINED, THEY THOUGHT, THE LACK OF WELCOME SOUPHANOUVONG RECEIVED ON HIS RECENT ARRIVAL IN HANOI, WHICH HAD CAUSED SOME SPECULATION HERE. THE DRV AND LPF WANTED TO DOWNGRADE HIS CLOSE AFFILIATION WITH HANOI AND TO MAKE HIM ACCEPTABLE

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TO VIENTIANE SIDE. ON HIS RETURN TO VIENTIANE THIS WEEK,

SOUPHANOUVONG HELD A TWO-HOUR MEETING WITH SISOUK AND VIENTIANE SIDE GENERALS. ACCORDING TO BOTH SISOUK AND SEPARATELY ACCORDING TO GENERALS PRESENT, SOUPHANOUVONG HAD HIT THE THEME OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND UNDERSTANDING AMONG LAO. HOWEVER, THEY WERE ALL STRUCK BY THE FACT SOUPHANOUVONG WAFFLED ANSWERS TO ALL HARD QUESTIONS. FOR INSTANCE, HE GAVE NO SATISFACTORY ANSWER TO VANG PAO'S SHARP COMMENT THAT IT WAS VERY WELL TO PREACH NATIONAL RECONCILIATION BUT WHAT DID SOUPHANOUVONG THINK OF THE NORTH VIETNAMESE TROOPS RECENTLY ATTACKING HIS TROOPS AT SALA PHOU KHOUN? AT SAME TIME, SOUPHANOUVONG APPARENTLY TOOK SOFT POSITION INDICATING AT THE END OF MEETING THAT MANY OF THE QUESTIONS GAVE HIM FOOD FOR THOUGHT.

2. NGON STATED EXPLICITLY SOUPHANOUVONG HAD MUCH IN HIS FAVOR; HE WAS MEMBER OF ROYAL FAMILY, A POSITION THAT CAST AN AURA ABOUT HIM FOR ALL LAO; HE WAS WELL EDUCATED, ALSO A VERY IMPORTANT FACTOR; HE WAS WELL KNOWN THROUGHOUT COUNTRY; AND HE WAS A PATRIOT. HOWEVER, HE WAS NOT ACCEPTABLE TO VIENTIANE SIDE BECAUSE IT WOULD BE A VIOLATION OF VIENTIANE ACCORDS WHICH PROVIDED THAT PRIME MINISTER BE A NEUTRALIST. FOR THE SAME REASON, NGON AND SISOUK COULD NOT BE CANDIDATES, THEY BOTH AGREED. THE MOST LOGICAL CANDIDATE, ACCORDING TO THEM, WOULD COME FROM THE ROYAL FAMILY AND THEY CITED THE KING, WHO WOULD SERVE IN CAPACITY OF BOTH PRIME MINISTER AND PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS; THE CROWN PRINCE; THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE PALACE, PRINCE SOUPHANTHARANGSY (SISOUK'S FATHER-IN-LAW); OR PRINCE KHAMMAO, THE KING'S BROTHER AND PRESIDENT OF THE KING'S COUNCIL. OUTSIDE THE ROYAL FAMILY, THE ONLY NAME THAT OCCURRED TO THEM AS A POSSIBLE CANDIDATE WAS THAT OF PHENG PHONGSAVAN, MINISTER OF INTERIOR. HE REMAINS CLOSE TO THE RUSSIANS, THEY SAID HE IS CAREFUL NOT TO TAKE CONTROVERSIAL POSITIONS; AND HE IS CLEARLY GROOMING HIMSELF AS A POSSIBLE SUCCESSOR.

3. COMMENT: THE MINISTERS' SPECULATION ON THE SUCCESSION FOLLOWS OUR OWN. SOUPHANOUVONG HAS ALWAYS BEEN STRONG CANDIDATE, BUT HIS NOMINATION UNDER PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES WOULD BE UNACCEPTABLE TO VIENTIANE SIDE. PHENG HAS BEEN CONFIDENTIAL

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CLEARLY RUNNING FOR OFFICE LAST FEW MONTHS. PRINCE KHAMMAO WOULD ALSO PROBABLY BE ACCEPTABLE TO BOTH SIDES. SPECULATION ON OTHER THREE MEMBERS OF ROYAL FAMILY SEEMS TO US SOMEWHAT FAR OUT.  
WHITEHOUSE

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